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WASHINGTON – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today condemned Saturday's arrest of Le Cong Dinh, a prominent lawyer who defended clients in high profile human rights cases, including prominent religious freedom defenders Nguyen Van Dai and Le Thi Cong Nhan.

"The arrest of Le Cong Dinh demonstrates a disturbing but familiar pattern," said Michael Cromartie, USCIRF vice chair, who recently led a USCIRF delegation to Vietnam. "Peaceful advocates for religious freedom and related human rights are intimidated, harassed, and jailed. Le Cong Dinh's arrest demonstrates that no human rights, including the freedom of religion, are secure in Vietnam."

A USCIRF delegation visited Vietnam in May, meeting with government officials, prominent religious leaders, religious freedom advocates, and prisoners, including Fr. Nguyen Van Ly and Nguyen Van Dai. The latter was defended by Le Cong Dinh. The USCIRF delegation was able to confirm the conclusions found in its May 1, 2009 Annual Report, including continued imprisonment of individuals for peaceful religious activity or religious freedom advocacy, systematic intimidation and discrimination targeting new converts and independent religious activity, and harassment of lawyers and individuals seeking to expand religious freedom.

Le Cong Dinh was arrested under Article 88 of the Vietnamese criminal code for "conducting propaganda" against the state. He is one of a growing number of peaceful human rights defenders who are challenging Vietnam's vague national security laws and other laws inconsistent with the Vietnamese Constitution and international covenants and human right treaties to which Vietnam is a signatory.

In its Annual Report, USCIRF recommended that Vietnam be re-designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) for severe and egregious restrictions on the freedom of religion. Recently, the House of Representatives passed HR 2410, the Foreign Relations Authorization Act, which includes language urging the State Department to designate Vietnam as a CPC. However, the U.S. ambassador to Vietnam recently reiterated the State Department's longstanding position that Vietnam does not meet the criteria to be designated a CPC.

USCIRF's annual report detailed the imprisonment of Le Cong Dinh, Nguyen Van Dai, Le Thi Cong Nhan, Fr. Nguyen Van Ly, the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, and dozens of other Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Catholic, and Montagnard Protestants currently jailed in Vietnam. It urged the State Department and the international community to press for their immediate and unconditional release.

"The Commission has consistently found that systematic and egregious abuses of religious freedom continue in Vietnam," said Felice Gaer, USCIRF chair. "The CPC designation is an important and flexible diplomatic tool, used previously to bring about some tangible results in Vietnam without hindering other bilateral interests. We urge the Obama Administration to establish clear policies and use all available diplomatic tools to support the hopes and aspirations of the Vietnamese people for both greater freedom and prosperity."

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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